DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 325 RC 022 157

AUTHOR Levine, Phoebe M.
TITLE Common Threads: Quilt-Making and Teaching.
PUB DATE 1999-10-00
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Women of Appalachia Conference (Zanesville, OH, October 27-29, 1999).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Aesthetic Values; *Creative Expression; *Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; Reflective Teaching
IDENTIFIERS Appalachia; Dewey (John); *Quilting; Teacher Engagement; *Teaching as an Art

ABSTRACT

A teacher educator and artist explores alternate ways to think of teaching as a creative endeavor. This paper brings together the voices of Appalachian craftswomen and the wisdom of educator and philosopher John Dewey to create a patchwork that celebrates the common threads of quiltmaking and teaching. Interviews with West Virginia craftswomen and a review of selected literature on quiltmaking in Appalachia provide authentic voices whose words and stories are interpreted within Dewey's philosophy. Dewey's focus on the ongoing nature of process offers a means to know and appreciate the full measure of engagement and passionate commitment to the task at hand. Whether the task at hand involves piecing a quilt or designing a lesson plan, Dewey's philosophy pushes the creator to embrace the presence and wholeness of the experience itself. The experiences of Appalachian quilters as they engage with the materials and methods of their craft can offer preservice teachers a new language for understanding Dewey's insights about teaching as a form of art. Parallels are drawn between aspects of the quiltmaker's and the teacher's experience, including use of a variety of shared materials, design as purposeful composition, creation of new pieces from old fabric, and the craft as a form of human connection. (SV)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Phoebe M. Levine
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

COMMON THREADS: QUILT-MAKING AND TEACHING

Phoebe M. Levine, Ph.D.
West Virginia State College

ED 436 325

Abstract

As an educator and an artist I search for different kinds of languages and experiences to help my teacher education students explore alternate ways to think of teaching as a creative endeavor. This study brings together the voices of Appalachian craftswomen, the wisdom of educator and philosopher, John Dewey, and my own intuitive need to find working relationships between many different forms of art. The resulting connections come together as an ongoing patchwork where quilt-makers and teachers can celebrate the common threads of their crafts.

Introduction

What do Appalachian seamstreses and West Virginia State College teacher education students have in common? They both work in loving ways to mix, match, and join the precious pieces of their craft into meaningful, esthetic wholes. Both quilt-makers and teachers try out tested patterns and techniques to transform the material of their handiwork into one-of-a-kind products. Both quilting and teaching are creative processes shaped and formed by both traditional and contemporary principles of art that are present and experienced within the living and working relationships of rhythm, repetition, balance, variety, and contrast.

Shared Languages

As both an artist and an educator, I search for alternate languages that help my teacher education students understand that the experience of teaching and learning is a creative process rather than a prescribed method. Tolstoi in his writing, "On Teaching the Rudiments," reminds us that ". . . the best method would be not a method but an art" (cited in Pinar, 1988, p. 120). I believe that Appalachian craftswomen who celebrate and fill parts of their daily lives with quilt-making experiences have some important truths to share with educators about transforming teaching methodologies into works of art. My search uses primary sources to find meaningful relationships between teaching and quilt-making processes: interviews with a variety of West Virginia craftswomen and review of selected literature that addresses quilt-makers from the Appalachian region. These resources will provide a variety of authentic voices whose words and stories I will hear and interpret within the context of teaching.

I have chosen to ground my study of the relationship between quilt-making and teaching within the theories of philosopher and educator, John Dewey (1934) who professes the creative nature of human experience in his book, Art as Experience. In my mind Dewey would welcome my choice of quilt-making as a strong thread that connects

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

RC 022157

his theories with the work of teachers and craftswomen. For most of this century his writings and philosophy have served as a beacon for both artists and educators. Dewey's focus upon the ongoing nature of process helps us come to know and appreciate the full measure of engagement and passionate commitment to the task at hand. How do I help my students experience what I call this full measure of commitment? As an art teacher I encourage my students to suspend their predetermined images of the finished product long enough to "get in touch" (literally) with the art-making process. I say to them, "Notice the feel and edge of your paper as you cut or tear it into shapes," or "Close your eyes and mold your clay, guided only by your sense of "intouchness" with the texture and weight of your clay." When these kinds of "art as experiences" phenomena occur, the resulting piece of work reveals not just a mechanical reproduction but a reflection of the reciprocal energy between the student and his or her media and subject matter.

Dewey tells us that "craftsmanship to be artistic in the final sense must be loving" (cited in Karelis, 1979, p. 47). Whether the task at hand involves the piecing of a quilt, the painting of an image, or the designing of a lesson plan, Dewey's philosophy pushes the creator to embrace both the presence and wholeness of the experience itself. I believe that many Appalachian women intuitively live and exemplify the principles of Dewey's philosophy every time they engage with the materials and methods of their craft. If I can hold the art-making experiences of these seamstresses up to the light of Dewey's theories I can offer pre-service teachers a new language to see and understand more fully what Dewey means when he talks about this integral relationship between art and experience.

Shared Materials

Several of the quilt-makers I visited adopted a practical yet charming, method for keeping their wide and rich assortment of fabrics grouped and sorted within selected spaces of well worn "paper board" or shoe boxes. I smile now as I gaze upon my own stacks of labeled folders with the high lighted texts as I piece together the material of this paper. Just like the craftswomen who sort through and select just the proper color and print to begin a new quilt, I spread my notes and books around me as I begin to mix and match the words of Dewey with the reflective thoughts and scenarios of quilters within the context of my own experiences and insights about teaching as a form of art. Like a quilt, this paper compares and contrasts, sorts and groups the material of my work to shed light on my own intuitive need to create a cross-disciplinary, holistic study about the presence of art in every part of our day to day lives.

One of my quilters spoke lovingly of her current scrap log cabin series because this pattern allows her to make use of the rich and fully packed layers of left over fabrics that grow inside her closets. She added that she usually keeps several quilts going at one time, an implicit sign of the need for variety in any human experience. Like the making of a quilt, the context of this writing comes together as I fit the pieces of my material together to create new patterns that accentuate the common threads of teachers and quilt-makers.

A Purposeful Composition

Dewey believes that the concept of "design has a double meaning. It signifies purpose and it signifies arrangement, (and) mode of composition" (p. 116). These two principles that Dewey speaks of, purpose and design, work well together to maintain a realistic balance between the practical and the elite stature of any work or art. Quilting as an art form in itself does not readily gravitate toward separation from public view. In contrast the more traditional art forms of painting and sculpture often appear isolated and confined behind the walls of museums and private collections. Perhaps the purposeful nature of quilting not only accommodates its utilitarian origins but also its function to fulfill the human need for doing and making thus making room for both the practical and the personal. The quilters I interviewed are attending to loving and personal needs whenever they pull out those shoeboxes and begin their piecing. One woman says, "The reason we put those squares in there (the quilt) (was because) I wasn't going to quilt anymore. . . . But I did. I had those in the shoebox, so I might as well do something. We were just working in pieces." Another quilter tells me simply, "I need to sew." Other recollections that Mary Clarke (1976) gathered from one Kentucky quilter reveals that "Creating beautiful objects had become too much a habit to break. . . . Each time she completed one she was restless until she settled down to another accumulation of brightly colored one-inch squares" (p. 18).

When we combine care and love with attention to order and respect for past tradition we get an esthetic form of art. This kind of art is not the exclusionary "art for arts' sake" because its elements and principles are blended and balanced with the human need for purpose. What kind of messages does this concept give to our teachers? Learning occurs when we give our students a sense of purpose woven within the rules, prodedures, skills, and factual materials that we teach. This sense of purpose in turn begins to nurture the presence of care and commitment. If we want our students to love learning, we as the teachers must feel our own purposeful need for learning and growth.

New Pieces From the Old Fabric

Mary Clarke also reminds me that "both weaving and quilting had associations with frugality and ingenuity" (p. 19). One quilter complimented another seamstress saying, "she didn't buy new material. She just used what she had."

Dewey says "reach for any material that stirs (the creative mind) so that the value of that material may be pressed out and become the matter of a new experience" (p. 187). I think of the scrap log cabins and the crazy quilts I've seen but I also include the more traditional squares and diamonds because they all begin with pieces that transform from one context into new possibilities. Dewey described it this way: " (a) welding together of all elements no matter how diverse in ordinary experience into a new and completely unified experience" (p. 267). Quilting gives new life to left overs, discards and even saved pieces of cherished heirlooms. Mary Clarke describes the precision of one Kentucky quilter: "Because Gracie was too frugal to waste good material, some of the

quilt pieces show the outline of a pocket that has been carefully removed or a side placket that has been ripped open and pressed flat" (p. 24). Quilters have much to share with teachers about ingenious and creative thinking skills.

Teachers often talk about being in the daily trenches where children arrive every morning with backpacks full of experiences that they collect outside the boundaries of the classroom. Their treasures mingle and mix, creating patterns and shapes that the teacher can never fully predict. Many of the individual fabrics, like Gracie's discarded pockets in her quilt, still reveal the stitch marks of home life and past experiences. The teacher takes care to handle the fabric with respect for each piece as a part of the overall design of this particular class. I remember one interview where the daughter of the craftswoman lovingly touched a section of her mother's quilt, recalling, "this is the dress I wore in grade school." Dewey says that "the past is carried into the present to deepen and expand the present" (p. 24).

When working with their craft, both teachers and the quilter wait in anticipation to witness the expansion and formation of the present. They can imagine the possibilities of the finished piece but they can never predict the final work of art as each piece is joined to another. I was interested by the number of craftswomen who more often use what they have on hand as often as they select and buy just the "right" fabric for a particular quilt. Teachers are often pulled toward new and promised "quick fix" methods and trends when invariably, months later, they return to well used and reworked patterns. Teaching and quilting are both evolving processes that are shaped and formed by the pushes and pulls of everyone and everything present in the experience. Dewey reminds us that the necessity of our "intouchness with the experience through struggles and achievement . . . contains the promise of that delightful perception called esthetic experience" (p. 19).

The Piecing of Human Connection and Human Touch

The power of human connection can reach across boundaries to dispel isolation and exclusiveness as we touch again with this notion of art becoming an occasion for separation. Dewey says it this way: " . . . a work of art is often identified as . . . a painting or a statue in its existence apart from human experience (in which it came into existence). When an art product once attains classic status, it somehow becomes isolated from the human condition under which it was brought into being" (Dewey, p.3). Quilters touch on the humaness of their craft both literally and figuratively. One craftswoman who was taught as a young girl reminisces, "Mom used to make us pull our stitches out and do them over. She'd say, 'Now they'll get their toenails hung in them.'"

Another important piece of this human connection is the quilter's readiness to mix and match one another's respective skills. "She pieced this on the machine. Then I quilted it." Another quilter comments on a friend who pieces; "All her seams are flat. And the quilters love her because it's pressed, everything is perfect." Two quilters working together on separate quilts spoke of their shared styles saying they "sew a lot alike. We can pick up each others and you can't tell the difference." The other quilter adds, "We go in the same direction (when we sew). (but) she does all those colors. I

can't do that." This sharing of responsibilities gives many quilts a unique kind of collaborative human touch. In addition this reciprocal relationship allows the makers the luxury of working in their preferred media, style, and techniques.

Teachers have much to learn about cooperative and collaborative teamwork from the quilters. Team teaching, multi-age groupings, and split grade levels challenge both our teachers and students to learn from one another. The quilters I interviewed seemed to accept and make allowances for their different strengths and weaknesses in their sewing craft. In the classroom we ask teachers to accommodate and address multiple intelligences and diverse learning styles.

The Ending and the Beginning

My study is not complete. In many ways it is only beginning. As I take time to collect and gather other kinds of experiences and piece them together with what I know about art making and teaching, I continue to explore new possibilities that help my education students begin to know and understand their new profession not as a method but as an art.

References

Clarke, M.W. (1976). Kentucky quilts and their makers. KY: The University Press of Kentucky.

Dewey, J. (1934). Art as experience. NY: Paragon Book

Karelis, C. (1979). Hegel's introduction to aesthetics. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.

Pinar, W.F. (Ed). (1988). Contemporary curriculum discourses. Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick.